

Derelict Land: A Barren Solution

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DERELICT LAND can be caused by the vagaries of natural forces such as volcanic upheaval, tidal erosion and abnormal climatic conditions, or can result from the activities of man in his search for wealth and better living conditions. Whatever the cause, be it an act of God, or human indiscretion, the use and reclamation of land is a challenge to mankind. In facing the problem it is as useless to condemn the motives of industrialists as it would be to blame divine providence. Mr. John Barr in his book *Derelict Britain** falls into this error; the cause of dereliction he avers, is "man's lust for coal," leaving "monuments to his degrading presence," after "private enterprise had wrung its profits from the earth." Such emotional thinking leads to obscurantism, and the mental slag heap.

The loss of amenity and recreational space seems to be his main preoccupation. He apparently deplores his lack of power to plan and impose his own ideas of a good life upon society. Most of us deplore the eyesores left by industrial activity, but beauty is often in the eye of the beholder. The ruins of White Rock Copper Works at Swansea for instance can appear as an historical abbey or castle, but there are those who would prefer the modern sculptors' monumental monstrosities or even garden gnomes. Nature can and does heal the scars of dereliction and natural cataclysm.

Commenting on the reception of a university-sponsored project to reclaim the Lower Swansea Valley, Mr. Barr complains about the unco-operative attitude of the Swansea people.

The project was initiated by Mr. R. H. Jones, Director of Courses in Social Administration and he secured the support of representatives of the university and others, on a voluntary basis. This kind of co-operation arose from a desire to participate and Mr. Barr should have no complaint, for the "unco-operative attitude" of the Swansea people merely means that as individuals they have not felt the urge to join in.

Mr. Barr appears pessimistic about the future and fears that new dereliction will outpace land renewal, and he argues that only by the payment of taxpayers' money and by planning control can the derelict land problem be solved. Undoubtedly the Swansea project is a valuable contribution to the problem, but, appeals for collectivist authoritarian planning action will not succeed; let us remember that our great cities and towns grew from individual effort acting in consort with the barest minimum of overhead direction.

**Derelict Britain* by John Barr. A Pelican Original. Penguin Books.

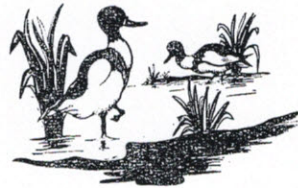
He submits that the redemption of what may be 250,000 acres is possible and that in the long term it can pay for itself in social and even economic benefits. But he fails to realise that the prime benefit in the form of enhanced economic rent will go to the owners of this land.

He is not unaware of speculation in land values, however, but his answer is "a land bank of derelict areas in advance of decisions about motorways and industrial estates—decisions which inflate the prices of even the most unholy (or holey) lands." A land agency is proposed, which should "be financially independent from rigid constraints of the Treasury and have the powers and financing equivalent to a nationalised industry." About £35 million is estimated as a national fund sufficient to clear the hard core of existing dereliction.

Mr. Barr says "it is not unreasonable for the nation to pay because we use the coal, sand and other minerals." But it is unreasonable, for were the cost of extraction of minerals to include the costs of the disposal of useless material, then the price to the consumer world cover this cost. And this is right, for some consumers use more of these materials than do others.

Advocating a levy system he arbitrarily asserts that the London Brick Company could afford to pay, whilst for "less buoyant" (whatever this may mean) industries such as coal in particular" payments should be "in line with their ability to pay," the national fund to make up the difference.

At first sight, speculation in derelict land seems inconceivable, yet in the Lower Swansea Valley land owners, including the National Coal Board look for prices related to industrial use while the local authority looks for prices related to derelict land in negotiating purchase of sites. In Lancashire, "because the County Council is loath to use compulsory purchase orders, land that cost £10 an acre at the beginning is now costing £800, and for the dirtiest land in Europe."



Speculation will continue to bedevil all attempts to solve the problem until there is an effective amendment of the system of land tenure.

Were land to be valued as unspoiled land no matter what its condition today as a result of the owners' despoilation, the incentive to reclaim derelict land would be applied at the right point and slag heaps would be come a liability to them rather than to the nation.